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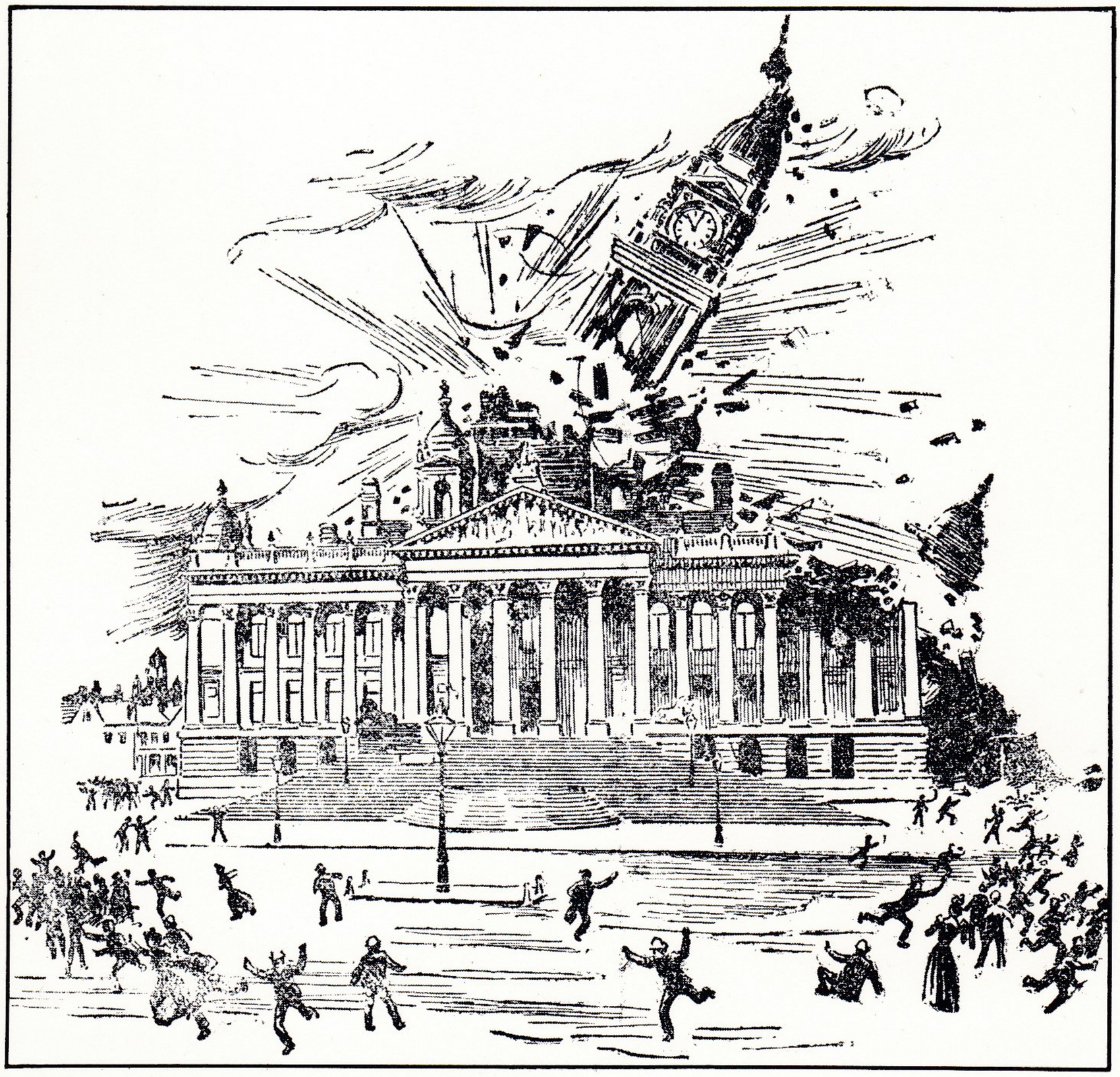
Local Battles in Fact and Fiction: the Portsmouth Election of 1895



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The Siege of Portsmouth.
Portsmouth Evening Mail, 14 June, 1895.

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LOCAL BATTLES IN FACT AND FICTION: THE PORTSMOUTH ELECTION OF 1895

E. S. Washington

The background

On 16 July 1895 the electors of Portsmouth were called upon to vote in a general election. Only three years had elapsed since the previous general election, when the two Liberal candidates, Sir John Baker and Mr W. O. Clough, had been returned to represent this constituency. Now the Tories had an opportunity to reverse this result. They had been hoping for such an opportunity for some time. On 1 June the Conservative newspaper *The Evening Mail* had written

> "How much longer must we wait?" is the query of Portsmouth Unionists, who are longing for an opportunity of showing that the constituency is sick and sorry of a government of make-believe.

Why in a time of septennial parliaments, did this one last only three years?[1] Why were the Conservatives, in Portsmouth and elsewhere, confident of victory in 1895? The answer to both questions is to be found in the declining popularity of the Liberals during the previous ten years and that was due largely to Gladstone's attempt to give a large measure of self-government to Ireland. The Liberal leader's sudden conversion to Home Rule for that troubled country infuriated the Protestants of Ulster and the Conservative opposition in England, and irrevocably split the Liberal party. When Gladstone appealed to the country in 1886 he was decisively defeated and, during the six years of Tory rule which followed, the splinter group of Liberal Unionists, led by Joseph Chamberlain, gradually became firm allies of the Conservatives. The 1892 election did represent a partial recovery for the Gladstonian Liberals, but his small majority of forty seats made the task of obtaining the approval of Parliament and the Queen for a Home Rule bill a hopeless one. The bill did on this occasion pass through the House of Commons but it was inevitably rejected by the Lords. The indomitable premier, now eighty-four years old, wished to strengthen his hand by an appeal to the people. An overwhelming majority in a general election would make it difficult for the Lords or the Queen to thwart his policy. Few of Gladstone's cabinet colleagues believed that such an appeal would succeed and he could not proceed without their co-operation. At the end of 1893 another important issue caused disunity in the Liberal ministry. The First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Spencer, had been persuaded by his professional advisers that the Navy needed considerably increased parliamentary grants. Gladstone stood for economy in government expenditure and he resisted this proposal with all his old crusading fervour but, eventually, was forced to give way.

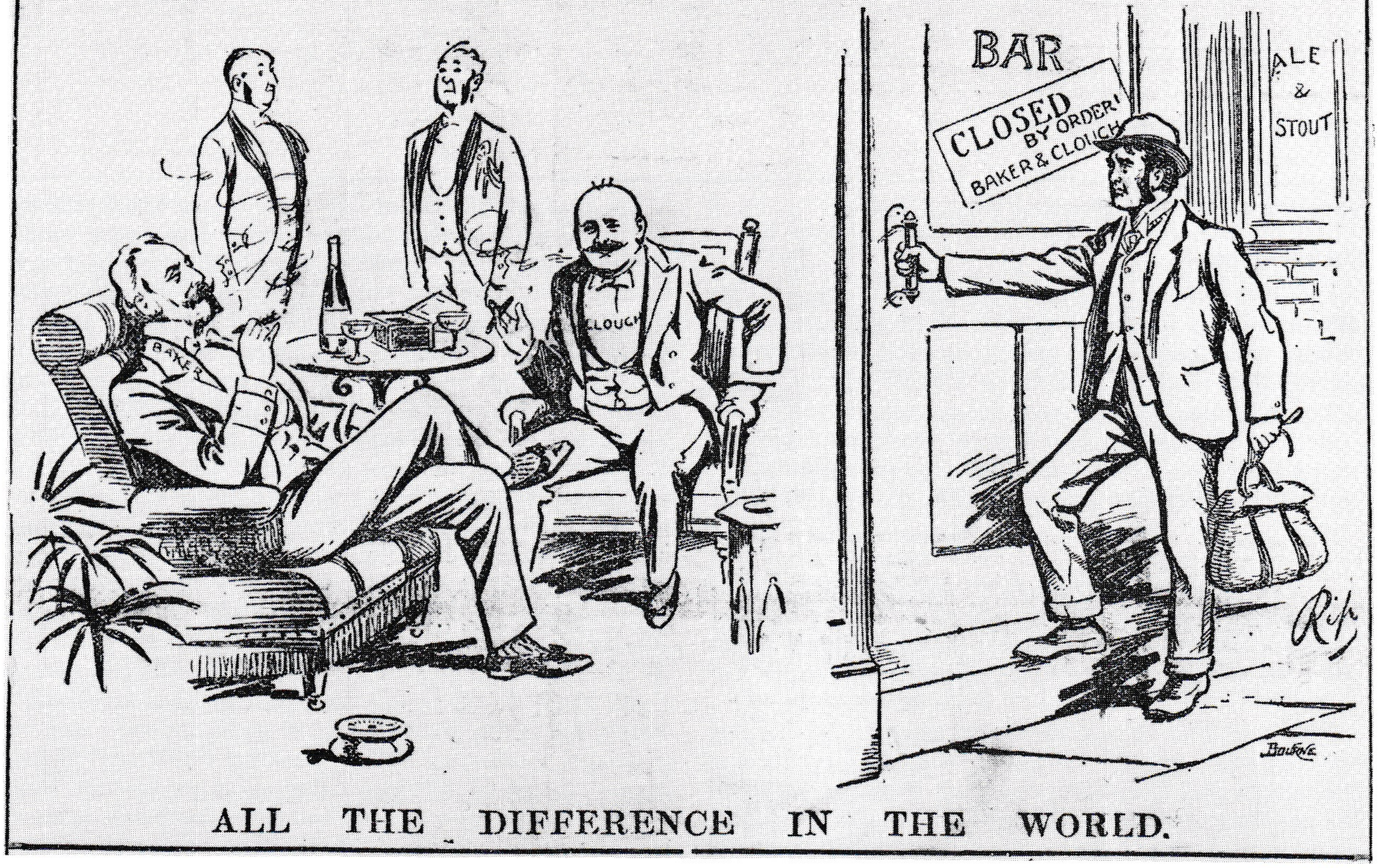
The first two months of 1894 were a time of uncertainty and intrigue. Would Gladstone retire? If so, who would succeed him? What would be the composition of a new ministry? The situation was complicated by the personalities of the politicians mainly concerned. Gladstone himself was displeased with most of his colleagues and not unwilling to keep them in doubt for a time concerning his intentions. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir William Harcourt, was an experienced minister with a considerable following among the rank and file of the party, but his arrogance and sarcasm had alienated most of his fellow-ministers. His thirty-two year old son, Louis, acted as his agent, trying to induce the party leaders to support him. Lulu, as he was nicknamed, found his task a very difficult one, assiduously though he talked and intrigued. Lord Rosebery, the Foreign Secretary, was a complex personality. He seemed to be endowed with all the gifts and advantages which would ensure successful political leadership: aristocratic birth, great wealth inherited and increased by marriage, intellectual ability, personal charm and eloquence – all combined to earn admiration and respect. But, as his principal tutor at Eton had often complained, there was always something of the dilettante about Rosebery. He lacked the industry and determination of a Peel, a Palmerston or a Gladstone. Also, he was too broad in his interests and sympathies to be a good party man. It is significant that he enjoyed the company of Disraeli, although a follower of Gladstone. The death of his wife, the heiress of the financier, Baron Rothschild, in 1890, was a grievous blow which made him more self-absorbed and moody. Rosebery did not welcome the chance to become Prime Minister in 1894. A key figure in the contest for leadership, though not a candidate himself, was John Morley, the Chief Secretary for Ireland. Though respected as a historian and philosopher, he was a vain and ambitious politician whose unreliability and ill-temper prolonged the period of uncertainty.[2]

When Gladstone finally resigned on 28 February 1894, it was the Queen's constitutional right to choose his successor, but she well knew that she had to select a man who would be able to persuade his chief party colleagues to join his ministry and who could command majorities in the House of Commons. She said farewell to her longest-serving prime minister without regret and showed her lack of confidence in him by her failure to consult him concerning the choice of his successor. She regarded all Liberals as potentially dangerous revolutionaries, but Rosebery as the least objectionable of them. He was therefore invited to form a government.

It would have been difficult for any leader to follow such a political giant as Gladstone. For Rosebery, that basic problem was compounded by other disadvantages. One of

PORTSMOUTH, MONDAY, JULY 8, 1895 SIX EDITIONS DAILY.

RADICAL CANDIDATES GETTING ANGRY WITH THE "MAIL."



ALL THE DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD.

the most serious was his membership of the House of Lords. It is true that several nineteenth century prime ministers, both before and after Rosebery, were peers and yet managed their affairs successfully. Rosebery's trouble was that he had with him in the Upper House only a handful of Liberal colleagues.

If his government was to have the essential help of the Commons, he needed a loyal and convincing spokesman there. In fact, the only possible Leader of the House was Harcourt, who had bitterly resented his defeat in the leadership contest. Harcourt claimed that he could not represent the Government effectively unless he were consulted concerning all important issues. This led to many disputes, particularly in the sphere of foreign policy. On this subject, Rosebery had strong views which seldom coincided with those of Harcourt and some other senior members of the Cabinet. Rosebery's approach did not differ greatly from that of his Tory opponent, Lord Salisbury. Both statesmen wished to consolidate Britain's position in Africa, especially in Egypt, on the Upper Nile and in Uganda. In order to defend our overseas trade, both wished to buttress the Ottoman Empire and to co-operate with France and Germany in the Far East, with the object of settling the dispute between Russia and Japan over China. This imperialist attitude was unacceptable to those Liberals who followed the Gladstonian tradition of 'peace and retrenchment'. On at least one occasion, when Rosebery and his Foreign Secretary, Lord Kimberley, failed to take action against the Sultan, who was responsible for the massacre of Armenian Christians, Gladstone showed some inclination to return to the fray in order to condemn his successor.

On domestic issues, too, members of the Cabinet were sometimes in conflict. One of the most notable achievements of the Ministry was Harcourt's budget of 1894, in which he introduced a system of graduated death duties on land. Rosebery was of the opinion that such a measure would alienate the propertied class against the party. Though his criticism of the budget was made in letters to Harcourt rather than in Cabinet discussion, the matter did widen the gulf of distrust between the two leaders. Harcourt was also mainly responsible for a bill directed against the drink problem. By his 'Intoxicating Liquor Traffic (Local Control) Bill', commonly known as the 'Local Veto Bill', voters would be asked to state whether they favoured the reduction or the complete abolition of public houses in their wards. A two-thirds majority would result in abolition; a simple majority in mere reduction by the licensing magistrates. This was clearly a most controversial bill, not entirely to the liking of some colleagues in the Ministry and in the party. Harcourt, as we shall see, illustrated the need for the bill by referring to the Hard in Portsmouth.

All these rivalries, jealousies and disagreements made Rosebery's premiership an intolerable burden. At times,

Local Veto: the Mail's comment.
Portsmouth Evening Mail, 8 July, 1895.

he would gain consolation from his books and from his horses. He was certainly much gratified when his horses won the Derby both in 1894 and 1895, but even these triumphs recoiled on him politically. Gladstone had enjoyed the strong support of the nonconformist middle class, but many members of this influential group found it difficult to follow an aristocrat involved in an activity which they thought inconsistent with their moral principles. Finally, Rosebery had long been troubled by insomnia, and his heavy burdens aggravated this demoralising complaint. In March 1895, he suffered from a serious attack of influenza and had to take a holiday at sea.

The Tory press gleefully reported the disunity and weakness of the government and prophesied an election before the end of the year. *The Evening Mail* wrote on 5 June 1895

> A change has come over the Senior Member for Portsmouth, (i.e. Sir John Baker). Not long ago he relegated dissolution to a dim and distant future. Now he and his colleagues are convening meetings of their supporters, evidently apprehensive that the end is not far off.

The incident which finally brought down the government seemed trivial at the outset and involved one of the most popular and successful ministers, Henry Campbell-Bannerman, the Secretary of State for War. He had just increased his prestige by persuading HRH the Duke of Cambridge to abandon his long-held position as Commander-in-Chief without offending that formidable old gentleman. On 21 June 1895 'C.B.' was suddenly challenged by a Tory MP, St John Brodrick, on the inadequacy of the supplies of ammunition and particularly of cordite. Seeing a chance of humiliating the government, Tory front benchers such as Balfour, Goschen and Chamberlain joined in the attack. When a vote was taken proposing the reduction of the minister's salary – the usual way of expressing dissatisfaction with his policy – the recommendation was unexpectedly passed by seven votes in a small house, a defeat mainly due to the absence from the house of some malcontent Irish, Welsh and Radical MPs.[3]

This was a minor issue and it need not have resulted in the resignation of Rosebery. It did, however, have that result because the Prime Minister and his colleagues were exhausted by their disagreements concerning policies and their difficulties in personal relationships. As Rosebery said afterwards, 'The firm of Rosebery and Harcourt was a fraud on the public'.

It would have been possible for Rosebery to ask the Queen for an immediate general election. He could also have carried on his administration for a few more months while preparing for a later election. With the agreement of Harcourt for once, he decided to resign so that the Queen could send for Lord Salisbury, who would himself have to ask for a dissolution in the near future. Hence Rosebery's resignation on 22 June led to the general election in July.

The economic and social climate of the borough

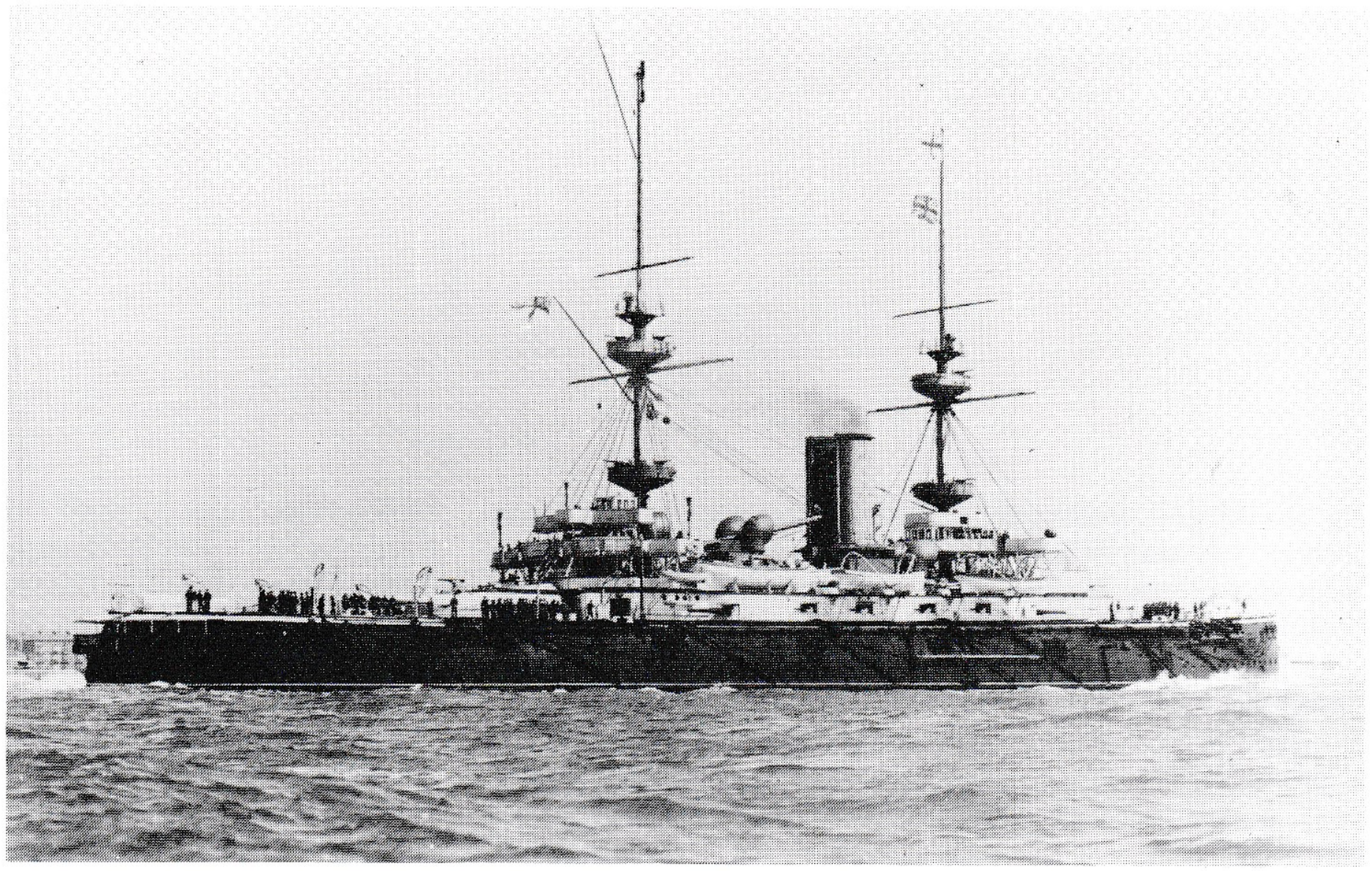
'This great conglomerate borough'[4] – these words were used to describe Portsmouth in a guide book published in the nineties. To a greater extent than most towns, Portsmouth comprised a number of contrasting, though interlocking, communities. The principal social groups were the officers of the armed forces, active and retired, the NCOs and ordinary ranks, the workers in the Dockyard and other industrial concerns, and the commercial community, including those involved in the entertainment of visitors to Southsea. This marked social diversity made Portsmouth a particularly interesting parliamentary constituency.

A small walled town when Pepys first visited it in 1661, Portsmouth gradually developed over two hundred years, and the expansion of the population continued in the 1890s. By this time the borough boundaries stretched from Tipner in the west of Portsea Island to Great Salterns in the east, and the population was 159,251[5] – '15th among the great towns of the kingdom in point of size'[6] – half as big again as the borough of Southampton.

The most significant factor in this development was the expansion of the Dockyard. The 1890s witnessed the largest peacetime expansion of the Navy, as the Naval Defence Act of Lord Salisbury's government (1886–92) was implemented. The Director of Naval Construction was Sir William White, who was determined that the Royal Dockyards should play a major part in the building programme, and these yards, which in 1884 had been criticised as slow and costly, and

> fit only to repair ships, were 10 years later the cheapest and fastest building yards in the world.[7]

In 1892 Portsmouth Dockyard completed two powerful warships, the *Royal Sovereign*, a battleship of 14,150 tons, and the *Royal Arthur*, a first class cruiser of 7,700 tons. In 1895 the Portsmouth labour force completed the *Majestic* in the record time of 22 months, weeks faster than Chatham Dockyard could complete her sister ship. The *Majestic*, a battleship of 14,900 tons, was the most powerful ship in the world, and enhanced the reputation of Sir William White as a designer.[8] In 1894–5 the government assigned £377,000 for the extension of docks and jetties at Portsmouth and a further sum of money for dredging the



harbour to accommodate these larger ships.[9] All this activity in the Dockyard gave employment to about one-third of Portsmouth's industrial labour force.[10]

Outside the Dockyard, there was scarcely any heavy industry. Small boats such as hoppers and barges were built, and Vospers had begun to build small powered vessels in a yard in Broad Street, Old Portsmouth. The only industry which served anything more than a purely local market was the manufacture of corsets. This industry, along with dressmaking, provided work for another third of Portsmouth workers, most of them women;[11] the firms found no difficulty in recruiting labour because the low wages of naval ratings and dockyard workers made it necessary for their wives to earn. Until 1894 Portsmouth tradesmen had benefited from the fitting out and victualling of Indian troopships, but in that year the town lost this source of income.[12] The town had a small commerical dock in the Camber, but this brought in a revenue of only £3,000 to £4,000 a year, and the cost of its maintenance exceeded its income.[13] Hence appeals for its extension were rejected by the council. A large number of people were employed in shops, and that number was probably rising at this time. The old High Street, fifty years earlier one of the finest shopping streets in the South of England, had by now lost its glory, and had been largely replaced by Commercial Road in Landport and by Osborne Road, Palmerston Road and Marmion Road in Southsea.[14] Nevertheless, Old Portsmouth remained a considerable commercial and residential area.

The distinctive character of Portsmouth derived, however, not so much from its industry and commerce, as from its ships, sailors and soldiers. Portsmouth Harbour towards the end of the nineteenth century may not have presented the splendour of sail which had stirred the youthful Cobbett[15] a hundred years earlier, but it still impressed the sharp eyes of the young Beatrix Potter.[16] In 1884, at the age of eighteen, she made a brief visit to Portsmouth, staying at the old Queen's Hotel, 'a queer old house with mountainous floors'. While there, she spent two mornings on tours of the Fleet, visiting *Victory*, then in the 'middle of the channel', the ironclad *Glatton*, the torpedo boat *Hecla*, and the training ship *Excellent*, and she also commented on the large number of hulks, training vessels, troopships and tugs.

When Miss Potter first arrived at the town station, she was disappointed at the 'poorness of the streets . . . and the scarcity of soldiers and sailors', but records that, later, sailors 'became plentiful'. Indeed, streets like Queen Street and Commercial Road were full night and day of men in naval uniform. Many large barracks with parade grounds were constant reminders of the naval and military presence in the town. Sundays in Portsmouth were enlivened by church parades with flags flying and bands playing. The Garrison Church in Penny Street with Grand Parade nearby attracted many sightseers.

There were almost six thousand troops stationed on Portsea Island and in the Portsdown Hill forts.[17] In 1895 there were three infantry battalions – the Northumberland Fusiliers, the Duke of Edinburgh's (Wiltshire) Regiment and the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. Some thousand men of the Royal Garrison Artillery manned the fortifications and there were three batteries of field artillery at Hilsea. At Eastney Barracks, the Royal Marine Artillery was trained for service in warships.[18] Among all these servicemen the town had mysteriously acquired the nickname of 'Pompey' – a name affectionately used through the world.

In such a heterogeneous community, political and social tensions were inevitable. Their manifestation was all the more likely because radical economic and social ideas were being widely diffused in the nineties. With the London Dock Strike of 1889, a crusade began to organise the unskilled, low-paid workers in unions whose leaders, such as Tom Mann and Ben Tillett, had strong socialist views. Socialist pressure groups such as the Fabian Society and the Social Democratic Federation sought to influence the more literate members of the working class and the more radical members of the middle class. Authors such as John Ruskin and William Morris, philanthropists such as Octavia Hill and journalists such as Robert Blatchford all made their protest against the low quality of life for many,

The Majestic.
By courtesy of Portsmouth City Secretariat.

created by a society based on *laissez-faire*.

Two outstanding individuals took a lead in the attack on social evils in Portsmouth. The first was Agnes Weston, who established in 1882 a temperance hostel, later called, with the consent of the Queen, 'The Royal Sailors' Rest'. In Portsmouth, as already in Devonport, 'Aggie Weston's' became popular because it provided a home ashore for sailors who realised the discomforts and dangers of the streets. Dame Agnes was also a doughty fighter on behalf of injured sailors and Service widows, and she had many a brush with Naval Commissioners when she thought them insensitive or short-sighted.[19] Nevertheless she was something of an establishment figure. The same could not be said of the Reverend Robert Dolling.[20] In 1885 he became priest-in-charge of the Winchester College Mission of St Agatha's, which was situated in the slums of Landport. A member of an Irish landowning family and educated at Harrow and Cambridge, he gained experience of slum life in the East End of London, but was still shocked by the moral condition of St Agatha's district and its neighbourhood. He said that there were 'few worse streets at night in the whole world than Queen Street, Portsmouth'.[21] Yet he found a certain attractive excitement about the life of these streets

> sailors everywhere, sometimes fighting, sometimes courting, nearly always laughing and good-humoured . . .. I remember well how . . . their uniforms and rolling gait redeemed from its squalor and commonplace this poor little district, with its eleven hundred houses and its fifty-two public houses. Charlotte Street was, from end to end, an open fair; cheapjacks screaming; laughing crowds round them, never seeming to buy; women struggling under the weight of a baby . . .; then some piece of horse-play . . .; many a cuff and many a blow, but hardly any ill-nature . . ..[22]

Dolling criticised the churches for their failure to meet the special needs of such an area

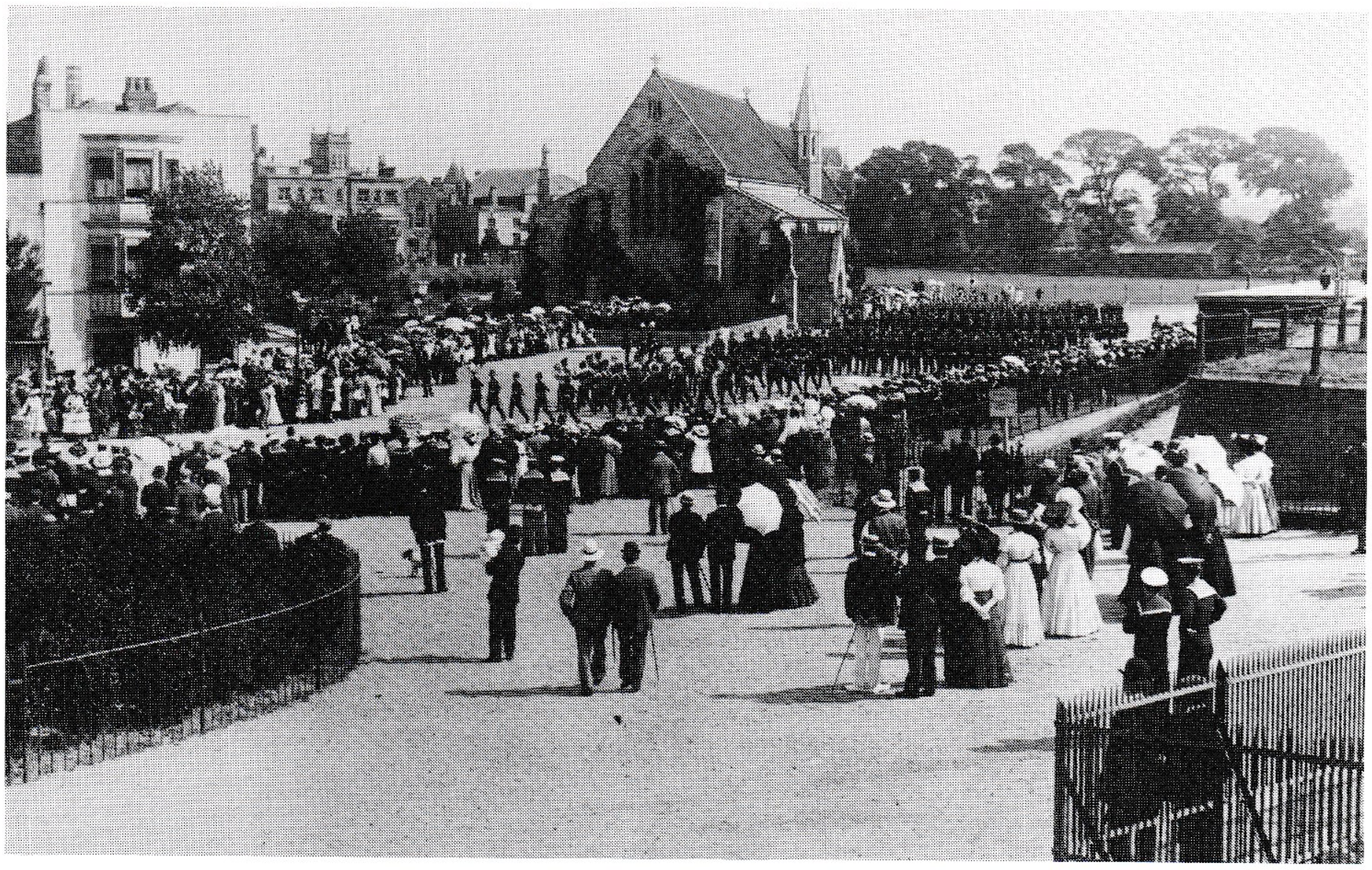
> Oh, that the bishops had the energy of the brewers! Oh, that the clergy had the persistency of the publicans![23]

In his Mission building in Clarence Street he gave shelter, food and help to the sick, to down-and-outs and to inebriates. He often welcomed to his house young sailors from the training ship *St Vincent*. These and other young people resorted constantly to his club and gymnasium where they could take healthy exercise, talk and even dance, instead of frequenting the public houses in the district. Dolling's two sisters and other devoted ladies gave care and friendship to all girls who sought their help. Dolling also endeavoured to remove temptation from his flock by threatening to expose landlords who allowed their houses to be used as brothels. His self-sacrificing life soon won him respect and admiration in Landport and elsewhere. The services and meetings at St Agatha's drew increasing numbers, though some were offended by his Anglo-Catholic ritualism. While he concentrated his efforts on cleaning up his own slum district, he was admired and respected; when his strictures on the moral condition of the town as a whole caught the attention of the national press, he was involved in a stream of controversy. In a Lenten sermon delivered in a London church, he said that our naval towns were 'sinks of iniquity'.[24] This unfavourable publicity for the town stung the mayor, Alderman Leon Emanuel, into spending an evening in the more notorious streets, visiting fifty public houses. He reported that in these fifty houses

> there was not one drunken man on the premises, and . . . in the streets only one man who was 'jolly'.[25]

He hinted that Dolling's sermon might have been preached 'in order to raise money to build a church'. Civic leaders were proud of the town's achievements during recent decades and confident that these were resulting in the gradual improvement of conditions and manners. To support this claim they could point to the building of the magnificent new Guildhall, the introduction of electric street lighting, the opening of Victoria Park, and of a great recreation ground at North End, the Reading Room and Free Library, St Mary's Hospital, St James's Hospital and the Infectious Diseases Hospital at Milton, and to the accommodation of 20,000 pupils in its schools. Dolling could not have been unaware of these improvements, but he thought that serious social evils remained and that the attitude of the Corporation savoured of complacency. Extreme hardship among building workers during the bad weather of January and February 1895 was to lend colour to Dolling's warnings; but the town's campaign to provide relief and employment through public and private funds may suggest that the Corporation was more sensitive than Dolling claimed.

He continued his crusade and found influential support from some of his clerical colleagues, including Canon Jacob, Vicar of St Mary's (otherwise an opponent of Dolling's ritualism), the Reverend Charles M. Joseph, Minister of Lake Road Baptist Church and the Reverend E. C. Chorley, a Wesleyan Methodist minister. They were the leaders of the Social Purity League, which sought to persuade magistrates and police to take effective action



against brothels and badly conducted public houses.

To Dolling and his associates, the drink problem was a purely moral issue, but it did have a political connection. At this very time, as we have seen, the Liberal government was planning an Act of Parliament, the Local Veto Bill, which would facilitate the reduction, or even abolition, of public house licences, on a local basis. In proposing this bill, Sir William Harcourt referred to the Hard in these words:

> In one of our great towns there is a street containing twenty-seven houses and having a length of 191 yards and this is the way in which the houses are used: No 1 is a public house; No 6 is a public house; No 7 is a beer house; No 8 a public house; No 9 a public house; No 10 a public house; No 11 a Post Office; No 12 a public house; No 13 a public house; No 14 a wine and spirit store; No 16 a public house; No 18 a public house; No 20 an hotel; No 21 a public house; No 23 a public house; No 24 a public house: thus out of twenty-seven structures, fifteen are public houses.[26]

The Portsmouth brewers were pleased when the Liberal government resigned before passing the Local Veto Bill. Most of them were no doubt equally relieved when Father Dolling resigned as priest-in-charge of St Agatha's mission for theological reasons, leaving Portsmouth in January 1896, just a few weeks after he had triumphantly opened a great new church.

The aspect of Dolling's work which had the greatest long-term significance was his relationship with trades unions and the Labour movement. Dolling believed that in the long run, the working class could improve their conditions of living only by self-help through organisations like the trades unions and the co-operative movement. He encouraged shop assistants, typographical workers and coal workers to join unions. He exercised great influence on the Portsmouth Trades Council, in which representatives of the different local unions met regularly in order to improve wages and conditions of work in the town. In a sermon at St Agatha's, he went so far as to say that 'Christ today would attach most importance to the living wage'. He was impressed by the religious convictions of the trades union leaders and undeterred by their non-conformity. The secretary of the Trades Council in 1894 was W. Slingsby Godfrey, an activist whose speeches were constantly reported in the local press. An agitation by the union led to the achievement of an eight-hour day in the Dockyard and a strong, though for the most part unsuccessful, attempt was made to limit the hours of shop assistants and to gain a weekly half-holiday for them.

A notable visitor to Portsmouth in 1895 was the Scottish working class leader, Keir Hardie. He was one of those workers who believed that there should be a political party to represent the working class and established the Independent Labour Party for this purpose. Under the influence of men like him, the Portsmouth Trades Council began to nominate candidates for the borough council. This policy was something of a blow to the local Liberal Party which had hitherto claimed to represent the aspirations of working people. The appearance of candidates representing organised labour did reduce the number of Liberal councillors in the local elections of 1894. In St Matthew's Ward, the appearance of a Labour candidate resulted in the election of Dr. Emmett, a Conservative; in St James's Ward, T. Brewis, another Conservative, gained election for the same reason. The Liberal *Hampshire Telegraph* took these reverses calmly since, according to its commentator, it seldom happened that national politics had anything to to with the town's local affairs. In fact, only four of the fourteen seats had been contested.[27] At that time the emergence of Labour candidates was of limited significance but it was an omen in both local and national politics.

When we turn from the workers of Landport and Portsea with their pressing social problems to the wealthy inhabitants of Southsea, we are reminded of Disraeli's 'two nations'. Southsea was, according to Dolling, 'the favoured infant of the Corporation'.[28] For half a century it

Garrison Church Parade.
By courtesy of Portsmouth City Record Office.

had been the district where the gentry with naval connections lived in large opulent houses opening on to tree-lined groves. Thomas Ellis Owen, an architect with a talent for town planning, had largely created this residential area. He even built St Jude's Church in 1851 to provide a convenient place of worship. The 'Ladies' Mile' on the Common, where the gentry held its fashion parade after church service on Sunday morning, presented an appearance in strong contrast to Dolling's Landport. Hotels and guest houses in this same area accommodated summer visitors. The South Parade Pier had been opened for their entertainment in 1879 and a railway line carried them from Fratton station to a station in Southsea in Granada Road. Southsea could claim that it was one of the healthiest places in the country, owing in great part to its excellent water supply and its efficient drainage system. Much of Portsmouth was not as affluent as Southsea or as squalid as Landport. By the nineties, a vast number of houses for the better paid artisans, the office workers, the naval petty officers and the army NCOs had been built in such areas as Fratton, Buckland, Eastney and Milton. These were usually well-built houses, but the streets, which crisscrossed each other, showed so little variety of architecture that it was not always easy for the visitor to distinguish between them. The extension of population to new parts of the Island necessitated the creation of new wards in 1881 – St Matthew's, St Mark's, St James's, St Barnabas's, St Luke's, St Bartholomew's, St Jude's and St Simon's. Another pressing need was the establishment of schools. Between 1870 and 1895, additional schools were established both in the older parts of the town and in the new areas such as Arundel Street, Albert Road, Highland Road, Bramble Road, New Road, Reginald Road and Omega Street.[29] It was in streets like these that the floating voters lived. An aspirant for the Council or a would-be MP had to win most of their votes.

The parties and the candidates

In 1895, MPs in towns were elected by all male householders and by lodgers paying £10 or more a year in rent. Small towns elected one member, while larger towns had two. In double-member constituencies, such as Portsmouth, each elector had two votes; and in Portsmouth there had in the past usually been two Liberal and two Conservative candidates. Most electors gave their two votes to the two men sponsored by their chosen party, though a few exercised their franchise in an idiosyncratic way by 'plumping' for just one candidate, or by voting for one Liberal and one Conservative. Such eccentric choices could be significant because in this constituency the parties tended to be evenly balanced during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In 1892, for example, the least successful candidate gained 9,000 votes and the most successful 9,643.[30]

Led during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by the Carter family, brewers who became the Bonham-Carters, the Portsmouth business community developed a strong nonconformist and Whig/Liberal tradition. Certain professional men also espoused the Liberal cause. Such were the solicitors, T. A. Bramsdon and T. Lapthorn. Predictably, we find the Baptist minister Charles Joseph and his fellow social reformer, Father Dolling, attending Liberal meetings. It is scarcely to be expected that Dolling would follow the Anglican tradition of adherence to the Tory party but it is rather surprising that Canon Grant, Vicar of Portsmouth, should appear on Liberal platforms.[31] The headquarters were in the Gladstone Buildings at the south end of Commercial Road.[32] Here there were administrative offices, a club and the Victoria Hall, large enough to house a body called the Seven Hundred, one of whose official functions was the adoption of parliamentary candidates. In each ward of the borough, there was a Liberal Association which would be represented in the Seven Hundred.

The meeting of the National Liberal Association in Portsmouth in 1894 was at once a tribute to the strength of the party and to the organising ability of the local party officials – led by the paid Secretary, H. B. Morris – and a source of inspiration to the party rank and file. Meetings were held in many centres in South East Hampshire but the culminating event was a speech by Sir William Harcourt to an audience several thousand strong in the Drill Hall in Alfred Road, Landport.[33] Using well known words of Tennyson, he castigated the House of Lords

> 'Property, property, property,' said the Lords Temporal. 'Amen', said the Lords Spiritual.

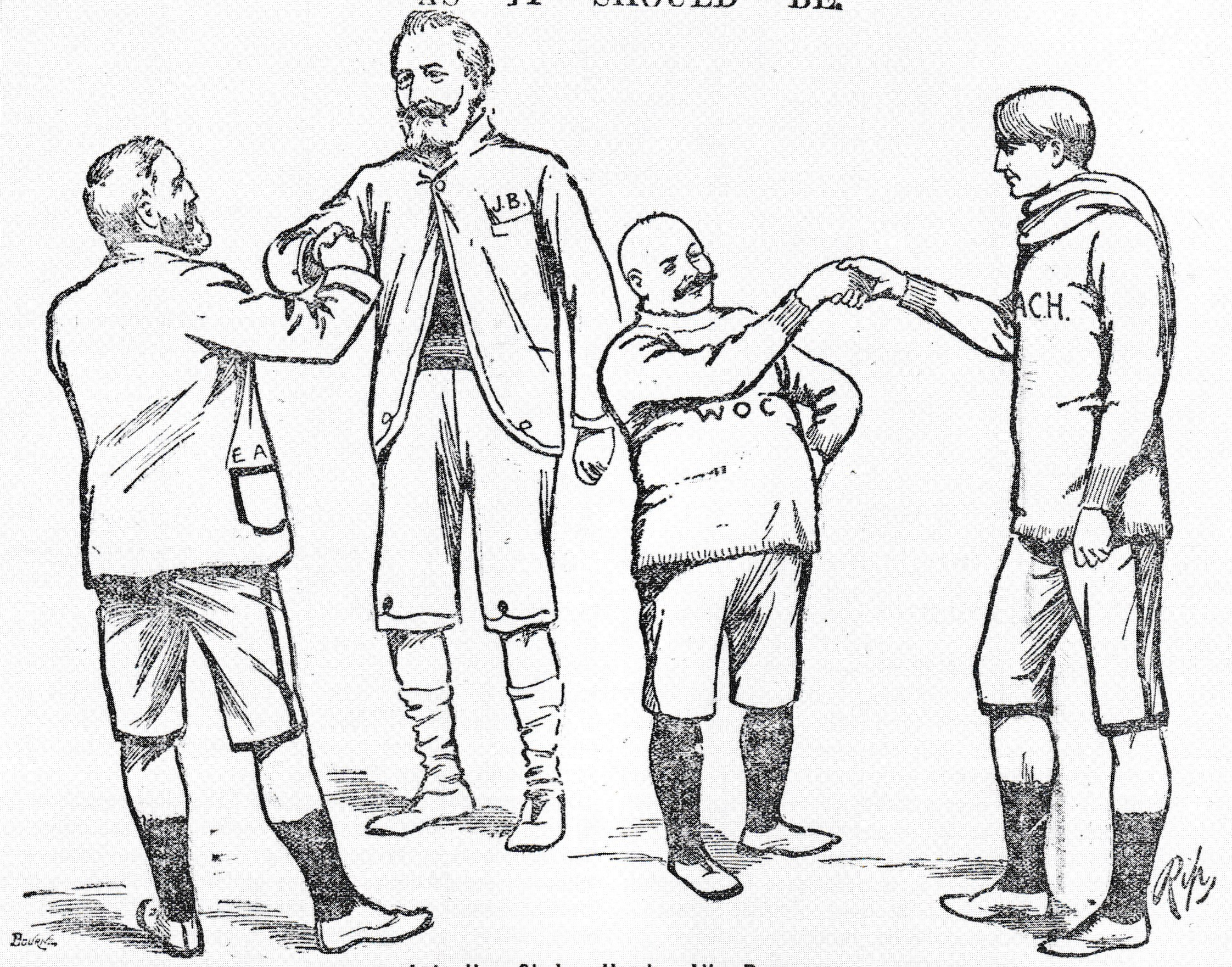
The structure of the local Conservative Party was in many ways similar to that of the Liberals. The Conservatives, or Unionists, as they were often called from the period of controversy over Home Rule, had offices in Commercial Road and a Central Club in Arundel Street. Conservative clubs such as those at Albert Road, Hyde Park Road, Buckland and Portsea, were also centres of party activity in the weeks before an election.

The leaders of the party in Portsmouth were usually serving or retired naval and army officers. The chairman was Colonel T. Holbrook, owner of *The Evening Mail.* The services also dominated the Portsmouth 'Bruce Habitation' of the Primrose League, a largely feminine support group of the Conservative Party. The chairman of this branch was Admiral Sir Henry Chads, the vice-

PORTSMOUTH, WEDNESDAY, JULY 17, 1895 SIX EDITIONS DAILY.

FLOWING TIDE IS WITH THE UNIONISTS.

AS IT SHOULD BE.



chairman, Major-General Chads and the ruling councillor Miss Chads. In 1895, it was decided to establish another 'Habitation' for the St Luke's and St Bartholomew's wards. This consisted of about 830 members and was named the Swainson Habitation.[34]

The Conservatives gained strength nationally and locally in 1886 by the co-operation of the Liberal Unionists. In the election of that year, the sitting Liberal member, Sir William Crossman, presented himself as a Liberal Unionist and was elected together with a Conservative businessman, Sir Samuel Wilson, who had made a fortune in Australia. In the election of 1892, however, the Unionists lost both seats to the Liberals, represented by Alderman John Baker and W. O. Clough.[35]

Baker was a native of the town, brought up in working class Landport.[36] An admirer later summed up his career by saying that he rose 'from the very bottom rung of the ladder to the very top rung'. He built up a thriving business as a clothier and outfitter with premises in Portsmouth, Brighton, Southampton and Liverpool. In addition to his business, he became a director of other local enterprises such as the Gas Company, the Water Works and the Clarence Esplanade Pier Company. He made an advantageous marriage with a daughter of a naval Paymaster-in-Chief and established himself at North End House. In 1857, at the age of 29, he became a Conservative councillor but moved over to the Liberal Party in 1865. He soon took over a number of jobs in local administration. When the Portsmouth School Board was formed as a result of the 1870 Education Act, he became its chairman and remained so for 21 years; he marked the occasion of his retirement from this office by entertaining 20,000 children to tea. He was twice Mayor of the borough. Local knowledge and experience made him a well-qualified contender for a seat in Parliament, but the split in the Liberal Party in 1886 resulted in his failure to win in the election of that year. When Parliament was again dissolved in 1892, Baker headed the poll. Three years later, his public service was rewarded by a knighthood. As an MP, Sir John was sound rather than scintillating. A report on one of his election

In reality, the atmosphere was less sportsmanlike than this.
Portsmouth Evening Mail, 17 July, 1895.

speeches said that he occupied the attention of his audience for fifty-five minutes. It should be admitted that this unenthusiastic comment appeared in a newspaper controlled by his political opponents. His friends called him 'the Demosthenes of Landport'. He also claimed to know how to defend the interests of the town and the Dockyard.

Baker's colleague in 1892, William Owen Clough, was a native of Huddersfield, and another self-made man.[37] He qualified as a chartered accountant, and was a member of a London firm with interests as far afield as Mexico City. In Portsmouth politics, he seems to have willingly played second fiddle to Baker. When following his senior colleague on election platforms, he delivered speeches full of the facts and figures dear to a financier.

Of the four candidates for the Portsmouth seats, the only one who belonged to the traditional ruling class was the Honourable Evelyn Ashley.[38] His father was the most famous of all Victorian philanthropists, the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury. More important to his life and career than his father was his maternal grandmother, Lady Emily Lamb, sister of Lord Melbourne. She married Lord Cowper but was for many years the mistress of Lord Palmerston and later became his wife. It was commonly believed in London society that her daughter, Ashley's mother, and all her other children except for the eldest son, were the offspring of Lord Palmerston rather than of Lord Cowper.[39] Not surprisingly, therefore, after Harrow and Cambridge, Evelyn Ashley became private secretary to Palmerston in 1858. During the next few years, he had several jobs and experiences which fitted him for high political office. He was called to the Bar and served on the Oxford circuit; he travelled in Italy with Palmerston's approval, 'to see what Garibaldi was doing'; he helped to produce a political and social periodical called *The Owl* and he wrote the second half of a five volume biography of Palmerston, taking over the task from Lord Dalling (Henry Bulwer). Had he been born earlier in the century, such a talented and versatile man with this aristocratic background would have been found a pocket borough and would have begun to climb the ministerial ladder at an early age. During the last third of the nineteenth century, such a climb was not so easy. With the granting of the vote to town householders in 1867 and to the rural householders in 1884, with vote by ballot and the limitation of election expenses, a young politician had to fight his way into the House of Commons. Evelyn Ashley was a man of intellect, charm and wit, but he did not have the common touch. Hence his experiences as a parliamentary candidate were chequered. He began with a failure in the Isle of Wight, enjoyed successes first at Poole and secondly in another Isle of Wight election but then was defeated four times in the 1880s and at Portsmouth in 1892. As a disciple of Palmerston, he was associated with the Liberal Party and was given a number of offices by Gladstone, such as that of parliamentary secretary to Chamberlain at the Board of Trade. He held a similar post at the Colonial Office and also was an Ecclesiastical Commissioner. With him, as with so many, Gladstone's Home Rule Bill of 1886 was a watershed; it caused him to become a Liberal Unionist. Such was the man whom Portsmouth Conservatives supported as their senior candidate in 1895.

The outstanding personality in the Portsmouth election was the man whom the Conservatives selected as Ashley's running mate. Still only 30 years of age, Alfred Charles William Harmsworth had already achieved a great deal.[40] He was the eldest of the fourteen children of Alfred Harmsworth and his wife, Geraldine. The elder Alfred Harmsworth had qualified as a barrister but was an irresponsible person and something of an alcoholic. His brood of children had to make their own way in the world. This, under the guidance of the matriarchal Geraldine, most of them were well able to do. A particular responsibility rested on Alfred, the eldest, and well did he discharge it. When founding and editing a magazine at Henley House School near London at the age of fifteen, he showed that zeal and ability to communicate which was to be the basis of his remarkable career. At 17, he committed himself to freelance journalism and contributed articles to the *The Globe*, *The Morning Post* and the *St James's Gazette*. In the 1880s the bicycle was the craze of the time, and young Alfred's enthusiasm for this way of seeing the country brought him both ill luck and good fortune. As the result of a ride from Bristol to London in heavy rain and on an empty stomach, he contracted pneumonia. When recuperating, he was advised to quit London, so he joined Iliffe's publishing house at Coventry, for whom he edited *Bicycling News*. He was so successful in this and other work for his firm that he was offered a partnership. The prospect of journalism in London attracted him more and, with his own small savings and contributions from two friends, he set up his publishing firm in the capital. He had already contributed to *Tit-Bits*, established by another far-seeing publisher called George Newnes. Popular publications of this kind convinced Harmsworth that the 1870 Education Act, which had sought to provide schools for all children, had created an almost unlimited market for attractively presented, simple newspapers. He himself established a weekly called *Answers to Correspondents*. A remarkably successful competition, typical of the ingenuity of the man behind the paper, ensured its popularity. The public was invited to guess the value of the gold deposits in the Bank of England on the night of 4 December 1889. Publicity for the newspaper was ensured by the proviso that each entry had to be accompanied by the signatures of five people in

REGISTERED FOR TRANSMISSION ABROAD PORTSMOUTH, TUESDAY, JULY 16, 1895 SIX EDITIONS DAILY.

THE MEN FOR PORTSMOUTH. VOTE FOR THEM TO-DAY.

EVELYN ASHLEY.

A. C. HARMSWORTH.

addition to the entrant. The exciting prize was a pension of £1 a week for life, at that time a living wage for a small family. The competition created a big stir, and Harmsworth used the money made by *Answers* to found no fewer than thirteen magazines in the late 80s and early 90s, including *Comic Cuts*, *The Marvel*, *The Sunday Companion*, and *Home Chat*. By 1892 the net sales of the combined Harmsworth publications exceeded one million copies a week.

Always a free spender when he encountered an imaginative project, he gained much publicity in 1894 by sponsoring an expedition to the Arctic, led by Frederick George Jackson. His interest in the sea and ships, also illustrated by his part in founding the Navy League, may well explain how he came into contact with Portsmouth Conservatives, so that he was proposed as a candidate. In the spring of 1895, he established himself and his attractive, well-dressed wife in number 52 Clarence Parade. On 29 March, he was officially adopted at a meeting of the constituency party.[41]

The Campaign

Eighty-three per cent of the electorate were to cast their votes in the coming election in Portsmouth. This high proportion reflects the extent of popular involvement in the party conflict. The local papers were strongly committed, *The Evening News* and *The Hampshire Telegraph* to the Liberals, *The Evening Mail* and *The Portsmouth Times* to the Tories. An election at this time was not usually accompanied by the violence, intrigue and bribery which had characterised earlier elections such as the one comically presented by Dickens at Eatanswill; yet the rivalry between the two parties in Portsmouth was often fierce. Above all, this was the age of the political meeting. Men and women came out in their thousands to hear the local candidates and any national figures who might be supporting them.

The first move in the Liberal campaign was the official adoption of Baker and Clough at a meeting of the Seven Hundred in the Victoria Hall on 29 June.[42] On 3 July the two candidates were ceremonially received at the station.[43] They mounted a carriage which was pulled by their supporters along Greetham Street to Victoria Road North, where an open piece of ground was used for an informal meeting. The procession then went on to the hall of the Bible Christians in Fawcett Road, where another meeting was held, with an overflow meeting outside. The most spectacular Liberal demonstration was held on Saturday 13 July, when party members and associated organisations such as the Temperance Societies and the Trades Council paraded through Southsea, Old Portsmouth and Landport with bands playing and cyclists as outriders. A mammoth meeting was held after the parade.[44]

Baker and Clough were not without their problems during the campaign. One source of embarrassment was the

Local Veto policy. Baker knew that this would offend powerful brewing and retail interests in Portsmouth. Indeed a meeting of the Trade had taken place on 25 May, chaired by Mr John Brickwood, at which Sir William Pink protested that the bill represented an attack on the liberty of the subject and the rights of property.[45] *The Portsmouth Times* ridiculed Baker's defence of the bill, saying that he had 'floundered in characteristic rodomontade'.[46] An episode in the House of Commons also provided his opponents with ammunition: on one occasion during the previous session, Baker had rushed into the House at the last moment to cast a vote, and had gone into the wrong voting lobby. In the face of the sneers of his opponents, he found it difficult to explain away this absurd error. Clough was attacked in a more serious manner. An anonymous letter containing accusations concerning his 'personal and professional character'[47] had been circulated in the constituency during the previous year. Though Clough had been exonerated publicly over this by his party colleagues, the accusations were to be revived during the week-end before polling day. The Tory candidates denied that they had anything to do with the allegations, but the episode must have worried Clough. He and Baker defended themselves by pointing out that they had done much to secure a private bill to assist investors in the Portsea Building Society when that body went bankrupt; that they had worked hard with MPs from other dockyard constituencies to raise wages in the Royal Dockyards; and that, unlike previous MPs, they had always been available to explain their views and actions in public. Moreover, both could claim an excellent record of attendance in the House. They counter-attacked by asserting that Ashley was a Liberal Unionist rather than a true Conservative, and that Harmsworth was a 'butterfly politician' inexperienced in the art of government.

In their campaign speeches, the Liberals claimed that their three year ministry had passed certain important measures such as the democratisation of local government, the enlargement of the government's revenue through the imposition of death duties, the extension of factory legislation and the humanisation of the Poor Law. Other significant reforms, they suggested, had been frustrated by the Tory trick which had resulted in the fall of the Liberal government. Such measures as the reform of the House of Lords, Home Rule for Ireland, the disestablishment of the Welsh Church, the attack on the drink problem by means of Local Veto – all these and many more appeared in a twenty-point Liberal manifesto. The programme would have been much more impressive if all the Liberal leaders had been equally enthusiastic about all the measures. Such was certainly not the case.

Street demonstrations and meetings near the Dockyard gates indicated the determination of Baker and Clough to gain working class votes. Hitherto, the Liberals, led by Gladstone, 'the People's William', had been rather more successful than their Tory rivals in this aim but, as has already been suggested, Keir Hardie and others were attempting to present Independent Labour candidates. The danger of this campaign to Liberal candidates was shown by events in Southampton. In that constituency, in addition to a Conservative and a Liberal Unionist, the candidates included an orthodox Liberal, a candidate who described himself as 'Liberal and Labour', and an Independent Labour Party representative who was none other than J. Ramsay Macdonald, later to be the first Labour prime minister.[48]

There were Independent Labour Party meetings under the 'Reformers' Tree'[49] and on Southsea Common on Sundays during this period, at which the main speaker claimed that neither party would do anything significant for the workers. What really counted was the attitude of the Portsmouth Trades Council. *The Evening Mail* reported that the Trades Council chairman, at a meeting some days before the election, 'was moved to say that it would be better if there was a working man's candidate in the field'; and so it must have been a great relief to the Liberals when at that meeting the Council

> recognized the value of the faithful services performed by Sir John Baker and W. O. Clough during the past three years and pledged itself to use every legitimate means to secure their return at the forthcoming election.

There were forty-one delegates at this meeting, of whom thirty-four voted to support the Liberal candidates; among the speakers were representatives of the typographers, shipwrights, bakers, hand-drillers, plasterers and carpenters. Their resolution was later endorsed at a mass meeting of Trade Unionists said by *The Evening News* to have filled the Town Hall.[50] Less important, but also gratifying, was a resolution adopted a week later whereby 'The Catholics and Irishmen of Portsmouth were pledged to vote Liberal, as Baker and Clough had always worked for Home rule'.[51] Such promises of support must have afforded encouragement to the two Liberal candidates in spite of the fact that, by the time of the Portsmouth election, the national tide was definitely flowing against their party.

In anticipation of a dissolution some time in 1895, the Portsmouth Tories had arranged a major demonstration and meeting to be addressed by their leader, Lord Salisbury. Great preparations were made and the Alfred Road Drill Hall was adapted by the Portsea builder, J. Croad. The plan was to provide four to five thousand seats and to

have a standing audience of five to six thousand. Seats in 'a more comfortable enclosure' were offered at ten shillings and sixpence for the front two rows and five shillings for the remainder.

> A large sounding board will be hung above the speaker's head. By this means it is hoped that everybody will be within hearing distance of the noble Marquess.[52]

Before the day of this great meeting, Lord Salisbury had taken on the burden of the premiership and was planning a quick election. In these circumstances, he felt compelled to cancel his engagement here. The Member for Plymouth, Sir Edward Clark, deputised for his leader and gave a stirring address.[53] Nevertheless, the Portsmouth Conservatives must have been bitterly disappointed.

Ashley and Harmsworth tried to make up for this blow to their chances by addressing many similar gatherings, and a report in *The Hampshire Telegraph*[54] of one of these, at a shop called 'Hughes's Store' in Queen Street, illustrates the atmosphere of such an occasion, with its rhetoric, its good humour, its disorder and its interruptions.

> Most disgraceful was the meeting held on Monday night at Hughes's Store, Queen Street, Portsea in support of the Tory candidature. It was a constant succession of violent scenes started no doubt by an opposition element but kept going by the extraordinary conduct of a crowd of Tory bullies who endeavoured to howl down anything approaching dissent and finally would not hear their own side. Fighting his way through a dense crowd of six men and a boy at the entrance, a NEWS reporter gained admittance to the store and whiled away the time by looking at a man putting up a flag bearing an eagle with a very bilious eye. The audience came in later on. It consisted of a large number of youths and boys, some of the fair sex, some Tory roughs and a radical section near the door. Mr H. P. Foster presided and told the audience about fifty times that there was going to be a Unionist government, that the NEWS said so ("Hooray"), and that the greatest prosperity in Queen St. was under a Unionist government ("Hooray" again).
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> The Hon. Evelyn Ashley *opened out* by saying that Providence made Baker and Clough what they were – no good for Imperial affairs. He had been brought up in the House of Commons and was therefore better than Baker for all his merits (Applause). He was surprised after his innumerable speeches that there was anyone left to vote against him. Interruptions came from near the door and a voice said "Go and get sober!" The Chairman chimed in with "It's all right. He's one of our Party." One next shouted, "Let's hear something about labour, Master." "About what?" said Mr Ashley, probably wondering what labour was. Noise drowned the reply. Interruptions caused by the Conservatives followed, and the Chairman had to interfere. Mr Ashley presently proceeded and promised to do more than Baker or Clough. (Cheers and applause). The Chairman then asked for more questions, on which the audience made such a noise that the Liberal section could not have been heard had they wanted to be. Presently a stentorian voice arose: "How was it you was chucked out six times, then?" The Tories booed and a man came to the front to ask a question. He was hooted and cheered and constantly interrupted when he tried to speak. He was understood to ask if Mr Ashley was in favour of one man, one vote. Mr Ashley said, "Yes, accompanied by one vote one value" (whatever that is). The Chairman made another long speech during which the audience, which had been smoking, spitting on the floor and drinking amber liquid out of ginger-beer bottles, got restive and interrupted. It didn't need a radical contingent to start the row. The Tories did it them-

Elm Grove, Southsea in 1895.
By courtesy of Messrs A. Buswell and Sons, Ltd.

selves. One of them shouted "How long before Harmsworth comes? Can't we go and 'ave a pint?" The audience laughed. Next they tried to hoot the Chairman down. Mr Ashley left amid groans and cheers.

Mr E. J. T. Webb then proposed a resolution in favour of the candidates in a speech in which in between interruptions he said the members had stolen the troopships and stolen the convict station or helped to. Mingled cries of "No" and "Yes" and disorder followed. Cheers were given for Sir John Baker by the Liberals; and groans and hisses by the rest of the audience. Harmsworth entered and groans and cheers greeted him. One man shouted "Here's a nice little boy", and a scene of indescribable confusion followed. Eventually a coster pointed to the leader of the Liberals and shouted "Chuck him out!" It looked like a fight but the Liberals closed up. Major Isherwood shouted, "Let him stop, convert him". A red-nosed man shouted, "It's them boys against the winder" and there was more disorder, the boys yelling like Indians. Then Col. Lanyon Owen rose and made a warlike speech in a loud voice which subdued much interruption. After imitating Lord Rosebery at the Derby, he spoke of Sir John Baker. Some of the Tories shouted "He's a sweater", and the Radicals shouted "No!" The Colonel said he wouldn't give in to that; Sir John was a friend of his and he denied that Sir John was a sweater. There were cries of "He is" from the audience and the Liberals shouted "No!" Several questions were put to Mr Harmsworth, the first being by a Mr Mitchell who said he was out of work because of the troopships being away. All the questioners but two were disgracefully received . . .. The resolution, which had not been seconded, was then put. Before the assenting hands were down and before the Chairman could ask "Any against?" or the Liberals could protest that this was not done, Col. Lanyon Owen rose and began "God Save the Queen". The audience then dispersed.

At a much more decorous level, we may quote a report from *The Evening Mail*[55] of a Southsea society occasion, a meeting of the Primrose League chaired by the Earl of Onslow. At this meeting, musical entertainment was provided to season the political dish, and in this respect a notable contribution was made by Lady Alice Ashley and Mrs A. C. Harmsworth, who 'blended their voices in the duet *Friendship* and were asked for an encore'.

By the end of June the Conservative campaign was getting into its stride. To direct its final stages, the candidates appointed as their agent W. Benson Clough, a London barrister experienced in electioneering.[56] At the same time the National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associations issued its manifesto.[57] After a condemnation of the failure of their opponents on all main issues, it offered the following positive propositions

> The issue is, Unionists and prosperity; Radicals and adversity. The Unionists will not try to entrap you by false promises, but this they undertake: to watch over the interests of the British people at home and abroad, to hold the name of Britain high and respected throughout the world, to maintain the absolute integrity of the United Kingdom and the British Empire, to re-establish confidence, that mainspring of sound business and good trade by every means in their power, to do all that is humanly possible to remove the causes of insufficient employment and of pauperism especially among the aged, to promote in every way the material prosperity, comfort and freedom of all classes of the people.

The somewhat nebulous character of this document suggested that the Unionists counted on the reputation of their leader to attract the confidence of the electorate. In Portsmouth too, the party clearly hoped that the prestige of an aristocratic landowner and a brilliant business man would appeal to local voters. A story told by Ashley at one of his meetings reflects this attitude. He said that when he told a friend of his, sitting in the House, that Clough and Baker still represented Portsmouth, the friend said, 'Never heard of them'.[58] Portsmouth, with its vast and complex imperial interests, added Ashley, 'wanted as representatives men with influence in the centre – London'.

Besides recommending himself and his colleague, and denigrating his opponents, Ashley endeavoured to spice his speeches with wit. In one speech he explained that Harmsworth had recently been engaged in the Jackson-Harmsworth expedition to the North Pole, and was now engaged in the Ashley–Harmsworth expedition for the Portsmouth poll. On another occasion, he told a meeting that Home Rule for Ireland was 'sired by the Grand Old Man and d . . . . d by everyone else'. Press reports do not suggest that Harmsworth was an original thinker or even a particularly eloquent speaker. He brought to the campaign vigour, ingenuity and a willingness to spend freely in the town; Sir John Baker claimed that Harmsworth 'was not going to fight on the old lines, but in that wonderful card-sharping fashion of having something up his sleeve'. This was demonstrated by an astonishing coup early in June. On 8 June, *The Evening Mail* announced that it was to be taken over by a publishing company; this was indeed the

Harmsworth group. *The Mail*, as it was now to be called, was to be 'lively'. It claimed that it would have no political allegiance, but, significantly, the first edition included the announcement that 'Mr A. C. Harmsworth has presented two portraits of himself to the Central Conservative Clubs'. But he had not taken control of this newspaper merely in order to keep his name before the electorate. He planned what he hoped would be a journalistic masterstroke to tilt the scale in this contest. He arranged for *The Mail* to serialise a fictional account of an invasion of England from the south coast. Surely the electorate of a naval base and garrison town would respond to a vivid narrative of this kind and would give their votes to candidates who advocated a stronger army and navy.

The idea was not new. In 1871, soon after the overwhelming victory of Prussia over France, an anonymous essay had appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* under the title of 'The Battle of Dorking'. The author of the brilliantly written article proved to be Colonel Chesney,[59] a very able engineer who had served in India and become the principal of a Civil Engineering College. He showed how our navy and army had become overstretched by our imperial commitments so that the Germans were able to destroy the few ships left in home waters by means of torpedoes or mines, thus enabling the enemy to cross the Channel and land in overwhelming numbers. How our own army, ill-equipped and inadequately trained, was routed on the North Downs near Dorking was described by a volunteer who had fought in the battle which led to the subjugation of England by a German William the Conqueror. This article caused a sensation in Britain and on the Continent where it was translated into several languages.

In 1895 there was still a good deal of anxiety concerning the state of our defences. Both Lord Wolseley and Lord Roberts expressed this feeling. At this time it was thought that France and Russia would be our enemies. That outspoken sailor, Admiral 'Jackie' Fisher, then Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean, was characteristically explicit. He was to prophesy that war would begin with a naval battle at Port Mahon, Minorca.[60] Clearly Harmsworth had reason to think that a new version of the 'Battle of Dorking' relating to the Hampshire and Sussex coast would have a strong impact on Portsmouth. William le Queux had written a book on this theme called *The Poisoned Bullet* and Harmsworth first invited him to write the serial. When he proved unable to do so, a Canadian journalist on the Harmsworth staff called Beccles Willson was selected for the task.

In its issue of 13 June, *The Mail* announced that a fictitious serial called *The Siege of Portsmouth* would begin on 17 June. The same announcement appeared on hoardings together with a dramatic picture showing the blowing up of the new Town Hall. The story began in the Dockyard on 3 September 189? (*Sic*). Admiral Sir Mark Freeman, Commander-in-Chief Portsmouth, was having a peaceful breakfast with members of his staff, oblivious of the fact that the country had been at war for some hours. He

Spring Street, Landport, c.1900.
By courtesy of the artist, Mr Mick Southcott.

gained his knowledge of the crisis from the newspapers. Meanwhile, in the foggy morning the French warship *Bouvines* had slipped into Spithead and effected a temporary landing of troops. Two days later, our Channel fleet, only ten ships strong, was defeated by a much larger Franco-Russian force near Eddystone and the way was cleared for a massive landing of enemy forces. From the coast near Emsworth the French advanced to Havant, where the citizens put up a stubborn resistance under the leadership of Mr F. G. Foster, the Chairman of the newly established Urban District Council. Aiming to cut off Portsmouth, the French advanced westward across the Downs and into the Meon Valley. A train bringing the Duke of Connaught, Queen Victoria's son, to the town was ambushed near Fareham, but the Duke escaped capture. Meanwhile, fighting was taking place on the outskirts of Portsmouth. The French attacked the waterworks, but this place was heroically and successfully defended by a small force. The gasworks went up in flames, and the Spithead forts were destroyed by an ingenious and daring French attack. A dangerous lack of cohesion was revealed when it was found that the army command did not know the area which the navy had mined. Confusion in the defence forces was increased by the death of General Danby. Portsmouth was now under siege, subjected to shelling and becoming increasingly short of provisions. By the end of September, the situation of the townspeople became desperate

> Towards midnight, a ragged and haggard mob presented itself at the Dockyard gates which, since the outbreak of war, had never been closed, and demanded to see Sir Mark Freeman and the Duke of Connaught. The crowd was not admitted to the Yard, but word was sent to Admiralty House where both officers were at the time quartered, Government House having been several times struck. Both at once came out to address and endeavour to calm the mob. Sir Mark had but just returned from a visit to Lumps Fort and was black with powder; the Duke was wet and muddy after exerting himself to stay the progress of a fire. After a brief conversation with the leaders of the crowd, the Duke and the Admiral entered the Post Office, at which they appeared and spoke. A very faint cheer greeted them. The poor wretches below had scarcely voice for anything of the kind. They chiefly contented themselves with hoarse cries such as 'Give up the town. Why should we suffer any longer? Better the French than starvation'. The Duke motioned the Admiral to speak first, and the old seaman, removing his cap, said bluffly but sympathetically, 'My men, His Royal Highness and I know well what this is costing you and how, up to tonight, you have stood up to it like Britons. Yet we urge you to stand up to it a little longer, for we should be traitors if we consented even to think of surrendering while we have an ounce of powder and a gun left from which to fire it. If you be Englishmen, show it now by thinking not of yourselves or even of your wives and children, for whom I feel with all my heart, but more for the Country which is looking to you and will never forget you. If we hold out, we shall not only save the Country but, believe me, we shall see within gunshot of Portsmouth such a splendid victory as has never been known in the whole annals of our history. If we surrender, which heaven forbid, goodbye for ever to the greatness of England. Nor would surrender help you. Have you never heard of the sack of a city by French troops? A man whose wife and daughters have been in the sack of a city by those troops will have no more happiness – if he is a man. No, we will hold on, all of us, until . . .'. Then there plunged from the dark sky into the centre of the mass before the Post Office a great shell which burst in the roadway of the Hard, making for itself a huge crater and flinging up a volcano of earth, stones, blood and mangled human flesh. The Admiral was flung into the room amid a storm of splinters and broken glass but received only a scratch or two. The Duke was wounded in the shoulder. In an instant, he was on his feet again and at the window, pressing his handkerchief to his hurt. 'No surrender', shouted His Royal Highness, 'for the sake of your honour as Englishmen. Don't think of it again and be careful with the poor fellows who are hit'. But he was too much hurt to stand. He reeled backwards, and the people, won in a moment by the Prince's self-forgetfulness and devotion, echoed his cry of 'No surrender' and then, even while they were still dazed by the concussion and wet by the blood of those who had fallen at their side, sang 'God save the Queen'.[61]

While the position in Portsmouth remained critical, the tide was turning elsewhere. British infantry and cavalry checked the enemy on the River Rother; civilians on the Isle of Wight helped the armed forces to construct a strong redoubt at St Helens and this was successfully defended by Marines against an all-out French attack. Most important of all the fleets based on the Medway and on Devonport came to the rescue of the Portsmouth naval base. In the last issue of the serial on 16 July, the day of the election, the author rather perfunctorily described this victory and

the collapse of the invasion. Britain had escaped conquest but at the cost of much bloodshed, destruction of property, hardship and anxiety. The crisis was a warning against unpreparedness for which politicians, military leaders and the general public could all be blamed. What was necessary, the author implied, was a government which would courageously adopt the financial and military measures necessary to guarantee the safety and liberty of the country.

The run-up to Polling Day

It is difficult to assess the effect of this propagandist story. Harold Harmsworth, Alfred's younger brother and financial adviser, pointed out that the circulation of the newspaper did not increase markedly during the weeks when it appeared and that fact may be significant. As has been shown, the author did his best to stimulate the interest of Portmuthians by mentioning the names of well-known local people and by referring to familiar places. To the reader a century later the serial reads like a piece of hack journalism rather than a subject which has really gripped the author's imagination and called forth his highest literary powers. Certainly it is not in the same category as Colonel Chesney's work. In spite of the much advertised approval of the work by the popular Admiral Charles Beresford and other naval experts, some of the scenes are implausible and descriptions such as the one already quoted suggest bathos rather than true emotion. It did not deserve to win votes for the Tory candidates.

At this time, the polling day in each constituency was between certain fixed dates, chosen by the Returning Officer – in the case of Portsmouth, the Mayor. On 6 July Councillor King met the agents of both parties and discussed the matter.[62] Saturday, 13 July, was the earliest possible polling day, but Portmuthians could not conveniently vote on that day because of a visit by the Italian fleet and a Naval Review by the Prince of Wales. Tuesday, 16 July, was therefore selected for the Portsmouth contest.

Both parties now stepped up their campaign. The Liberals had as their agent the local solicitor, T. Lapthorn. He organised a series of open-air meetings in every part of the borough. Baker and Clough were called upon to address three or four such meetings every day. A meeting held near the Unicorn Gate of the Dockyard attracted as many as three thousand people. Another was held in the Drill Hall at which Canon Grant described Conservative policy as 'charmingly indistinct'. Father Dolling was to have appeared at this meeting but sent apologies for his inability to attend. The Liberal newspapers during the run-up to the election included many a diatribe against the Unionist candidates. In one such attack, they were described as

> Two men, one of whom will support the landowning

Voller Street, Landport, c.1900.
By courtesy of the artist, Mr Mick Southcott.

classes at the expense of the working classes, the other a young man devoid of political experience who will merely vote at the beck and call of Lord Salisbury.

At the meetings and in the press, appeals were made for help in canvassing and similar tasks. Cyclists of Liberal persuasion were asked to check addresses in order to trace the three thousand voters who were believed to have changed their domicile since the last election. On the eve of the poll, women were asked to play their part. Having no vote, they could at any rate produce the family meals promptly enough to allow their husbands ample time to fulfil their constitutional duty.

Tory organisation during the final stages of their campaign must have suffered by the serious illness of their agent, Benson Clough. Nevertheless, they had many keen workers such as A. W. White, head of a local transport firm, who appealed to party supporters to lend their carriages so that infirm voters could be conveyed to the polling stations. A somewhat rowdy meeting was held in the Fawcett Road Hall, during which their opponents caused temporary confusion by turning off the gas which lit the building. Another mammoth meeting was held in the Drill Hall, when the audience was addressed by the Tory minister, St John Brodrick.[63]

On 10 July, Bramsdon warned a Liberal meeting that the anonymous accusations against Clough, already aired in 1894, were being revived. On the Friday and Saturday preceding the poll, several London newspapers reported that a Mr W. Dallas, accused of libelling W. O. Clough, had applied at Bow Street Magistrates' Court, for permission to see the sworn evidence relating to a case which had come up in 1889. The case concerned was a bastardy suit brought by a married lady against Clough, which had been settled out of court. On Monday 15 July, the day before the general election, *The Mail*, now controlled, of course, by the Harmsworth group, carried a long article on this subject. The revival of this scandal caused the electoral campaign to end in an atmosphere of rancour. The Liberals accused the Unionists of smear tactics, but the Unionist agent and candidates denied all responsibility for the allegations.

The election and its result

By 16 July, the Liberal party faced the prospect of heavy defeat in the country as a whole. Over a hundred Unionists had been returned unopposed and it must have been particularly discouraging for Portsmouth Liberals that this group included four Hampshire constituencies – The New Forest, Winchester, Petersfield and South Hampshire. The member for the South Hampshire area, Sir Frederick Fitz-Wigram of Leigh Park, Havant, was a very well-known figure in the borough. Even more alarming for Liberals were some of the results of early contests. A profound humiliation for the party was the defeat of Sir William Harcourt at Derby. Little wonder that, on the very day of the Portsmouth election, *The Mail* gleefully mocked Rosebery in the following verse

> Twixt ups and downs and outs and ins
> Life has its little crosses.
> The man that scored two Derby wins
> Must bear two Derby losses.

Another cruel blow was the defeat of John Morley at Newcastle. A contributory factor in this result had been the loss of Liberal votes to an Independent Labour candidate. Could the Liberal tradition and strong party organisation in Portsmouth hold out against the tide of Toryism in the country? That was the question that must have exercised the minds of the candidates and all local party leaders as the Portsmouth voters went to the polling stations between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m.

With a record number of 24,197 people on the register, divided among fourteen wards, it had been thought necessary to increase the number of polling stations to forty. These were spread evenly throughout the borough, usually either in the new Board Schools, or in schoolrooms attached to churches and chapels. A smaller ward, such as St Thomas's (Old Portsmouth), with 889 voters, had two stations, while the largest ward, St Bartholomew's, with 3,154 voters, had six. Each of the polling stations was presided over by a leading citizen, several aldermen and councillors serving in this capacity.[64] When the polling stations closed, the boxes were conveyed in cabs to the Town Hall where the count took place. In view of the ill-feeling between the parties, the Mayor tactfully arranged for the Unionists to occupy his Parlour and for the Liberals to wait in his Banqueting Hall. During the three-and-a-half-hour count, a large, excited but orderly crowd assembled in the Town Hall Square. Few would hear the Mayor's announcement of the result from the Town Hall steps but the Borough Engineer had arranged for the figures to be painted on an electrically-illuminated screen, thus making use of the electricity service introduced into the town during the previous year.

At 11.30 p.m. came the declaration; Ashley 9,567, Baker 10,451, Clough 10,255, Harmsworth 9,717. For those within earshot, the suspense was over but it took some time to convey the news on the electric indicator. Indeed, *The Mail* boasted on the following day that a magic lantern, made available by the newspaper above a tobaccon-

ist's shop in Commercial Road, showed the result several minutes before the official board. *The Mail* screen displayed results from other constituencies and political cartoons, until 1 a.m. Those who relied on *The Mail* for their information and entertainment may have got the important news quickly but they missed a dramatic altercation on the Town Hall steps. When Baker was called upon to propose the official vote of thanks to the returning officer, he referred to the bitterness of the election and the tactics of his opponents in strong terms

> I cannot forgive, nor can I forget the course this election has pursued for weeks past. I believe the borough has escaped a calamity which for years, they will rejoice for having escaped.

Clough and Ashley spoke formally, but drama crept in during Harmsworth's speech. Having spoken civilly of Baker, he proceeded to congratulate Clough, whereupon the following exchange took place:

Clough I don't wish to have your congratulations. I decline to accept them.

Harmsworth That may be one way of accepting victory. It would not be mine.

Clough I have said the same thing to you privately and you have no right to put me in this position publicly.[65]

The pleasure felt by the Liberals in Portsmouth after their victory must have been modified by the large number of Unionist successes announced during the later part of the week. Of particular interest was the result in Southampton. A more robust election had been fought there. Pressing home the Local Veto issue, the Unionists organised a procession of costermongers with the senior candidate, Tankerville Chamberlayne, at their head. A large tankard was hoisted on a pole at the top of Chamberlayne's carriage while a supporter proclaimed periodically, 'Vote for Chamberlayne and beer'. Chamberlayne and his Unionist colleague were in fact elected. The previous Liberal Member, Sir Francis Evans, lost his seat in part because of the intervention of Ramsay Macdonald, though the latter gained only 867 votes. That was not the end of the story of the Southampton election. Later in the year, a petition resulted in Chamberlayne's being unseated under the Corrupt Practices Act. In the ensuing by-election, Sir Francis Evans regained his seat after a political deal in which Macdonald agreed not to offer himself as a candidate.[66]

In most constituencies, the Unionists triumphed even without the intervention of Independent Labour Party candidates. Lord Salisbury's Government gained a majority of 150 seats. This was an electoral success even greater than those won by the Tory party in 1846, 1874 and 1886. Clearly the majority of the electorate had lost confidence in a Liberal Party whose aims were so diverse. By contrast, the Conservatives and their allies seemed united under the firm and experienced leadership of Salisbury. The Liberals took refuge in the excuse that their opponents had 'floated in on beer'.

Reports in *The Portsmouth Times* and *The Mail* make it plain that the local Unionists were acutely disappointed by their failure to share the general triumph. There naturally followed careful analysis of the voting, and comment on the candidates and the campaign. In this regard, interesting evidence was furnished by the voting pattern. 110 votes were 'plumped' for Baker; 20 for Clough; 34 for Ashley; 104 for Harmsworth. 10,146 were cast for Baker and Clough; 9,431 for Ashley and Harmsworth; 129 for Baker and Harmsworth; 36 for Ashley and Clough; 66 for Ashley and Baker; 53 for Clough and Harmsworth.[67] These figures suggest that most people voted according to party allegiance; that Baker gained something for his long period of public service in the town and that Clough depended largely on the influence of his senior colleague, that Ashley had made no really decisive impact in spite of his aristocratic lineage, and Harmsworth had achieved some positive results by his energetic and ingenious campaign.

Ashley revealed his chagrin in a letter to *The Mail* on the day following the election. Announcing the end of his Portsmouth candidature, he warned future Unionist candidates that

> elections were now swayed by a dense mass of Dockyard men and dwellers in the northern portion of the town to whom politics and Imperial considerations and even their own self-interest, were as nothing compared with their socialistic and unreasoning hatred of everything that, rightly or wrongly, they considered superior to themselves either in position or intelligence.

He recommended the division of the borough into two constituencies so that the more prosperous areas should not be 'permanently disfranchised'. This outburst from a disillusioned man went far to justify the criticism made in a letter written by a Conservative voter to Ashley at this time. 'It is through no fault of your own, but you do not and cannot identify yourself sufficiently with the masses'. Ashley replied that, like his celebrated father, he had always been concerned with the welfare of the working

class. His difficulty had been the fact that in the boroughs of the South, 'there was little of politics, alas, only parties and personalities'.[68] The real trouble for Ashley was that the politics to which he was accustomed did not include the economic and social aspirations of the recently enfranchised working class.

Early in November the Portsmouth Unionists gave a farewell dinner at *The George*, High Street, to their unsuccessful candidates.[69] Amid the usual compliments, it was hinted that Ashley might find an opportunity for the exercise of his talents in the House of Lords.

However he never did enter the House of Lords, spending his later years in public work in West Hampshire as Mayor of Romsey, Deputy-Lieutenant, J.P. and Verderer of the New Forest.

In his speech at the farewell dinner, Harmsworth made it clear that, in spite of his attachment to Portsmouth, he would not stand again for the borough or for any other large urban constituency. He obviously knew that to undertake again such a task on top of his arduous business commitments might endanger his health, never robust. Yet it was typical of the man that, in the year following, he bounced back to success by establishing the first popular daily newspaper costing a halfpenny. This daily he named, after his Portsmouth newspaper, *The Daily Mail*. A peerage under the title of Lord Northcliffe in 1905, and the purchase of *The Times* in 1908, were further landmarks in his rise to fame. He never entered the House of Commons but during the First World War exercised a very significant influence because his ideas were in tune with the patriotic determination of the British people. Rendered overconfident by this influence, he aspired to an official place in the British delegation at the Peace Conference. Lloyd George earned his bitter resentment by leaving him out. Though his last years were clouded by ill-health and disappointment, he remains the first and greatest of English popular newspaper proprietors.

Clough's parliamentary career did not last long. In 1900 he had to face charges of fraudulent misrepresentation in the promotion of companies in Mexico. When he lost his appeal, he had no alternative but to give up his seat.[70] He was replaced in a by-election in May by Bramsdon, who had done so much to secure the election of Clough and Baker in 1895. Sir John Baker still had a long period of parliamentary service before him. After five years on the back benches of a rather weak opposition party, he, with his colleague Bramsdon, lost his seat in the Khaki election of October 1900, but he enjoyed the excitement of taking part in the landslide victory of the Liberals in 1906. He remained a vigorous MP and an active member of the Portsmouth Corporation until his sudden death in 1909 at the age of eighty-one. By that time the bitterness of the 1895 election had been forgotten and Conservatives no less than Liberals paid impressive tributes to 'Honest John'.

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